

#215 GEORGE MORTON: FORT ARMSTRONG

John Martini (JM): This is an oral history interview tape with Mr. George T. Morton.

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JM: This is December 5, 1991 and this is an oral history tape with Mr. George T. Morton. On December 7, 1941, Mr. Morton was a tech sergeant with the U.S. Army stationed at Fort Armstrong, on Honolulu Harbor. At that time, he was twenty years of age. My name is John Martini, park ranger, working with the USS ARIZONA Memorial, and this tape is being made in conjunction with television station KHET in Honolulu.

And, good morning, good afternoon now. (Chuckles)

George Morton (GM): (Chuckles) It's a little later now.

JM: Thanks for coming.

GM: Yeah. Thank you for inviting me.

JM: Well, I generally first ask, when did you enlist in the Army?

GM: Ooh, when I was eighteen, or soon after. No, about six months after I was eighteen, I decided I had worked enough. I had been working as a bookbinder's helper, and that was not a lot of money. And the Army offered some, you know, attractions in the way of a career activity. And once there was a chance to move into an overseas type thing, then it became attractive and I signed up.

JM: When you enlisted, did they give you any options of where you could be stationed? Did you have choices?

GM: Yes, yes, Philippines, which I'm glad I didn't take. And Hawaii, and also Panama. So there were three options in the overseas options.

JM: Was Hawaii your first choice?

GM: Yeah, naturally.

JM: What kind of image did you have of Hawaii at that time?

GM: Oh, the usual travel brochure, the type of thing you'd see and what they had -- travel logs at that time. I think they were called travel logs. And it was an attraction. Plus the fact that they were very down-to-earth and said, you know, "It's not all fun and games. You got work and it's going to be warm." But I felt they were honest and it was an attractive type thing to do.

JM: And when did you actually arrive here, in the islands?

GM: May of 1940.

JM: Nineteen forty?

GM: Right.

JM: Oh, so you'd been here a year and a half plus.

GM: Right. I had been in Schofield. We used to have a little train, a very narrow gauge railroad. Have you ever seen this narrow gauge? Okay. They hauled us up to Schofield from the docks and then, you know, debarked at the sign of course.

JM: So do you remember which quad you were in up there?

GM: We were in a new building. It was --- this had just been built for the quartermaster, and the new building which also meant we had to get out after you finished all your duty and training, get out and plant grass and trees, and all that other crud.

JM: And at this time, you were assigned to quartermaster quarters.

GM: Right, right. This was a known situation with the automotive activity.

JM: Okay. Okay. How was eighteen months of peacetime here before December 7? How did you like soldiering in Hawaii?

GM: Great, you know, it was a chance to see the area and usually what some of us would do, several of the fellows had cars. We'd chip in and buy gasoline and go to different places around the island. And then, about the beginning of 1940, the War Department decided that that type of group would go into the ordnance department. So we were transferred into ordnance and then pulled downtown from Schofield.

JM: Into ordnance?

GM: The ordnance department.

JM: Yeah, doing what kind of things?

GM: Essentially the same thing plus picking up, oh, things with the small tanks, the light tanks, medium tanks, half tracks, weasels -- you know what weasel is? Yeah.

JM: Little track vehicle, yeah?

GM: Right, amphibious type LTDS.

JM: Did they have tanks here in Hawaii, before the attack?

GM: They had light tanks.

JM: They were, what, Stewart M-3s, little guys with a turret on top?

GM: Yeah, yeah. Go like hell, but I don't know what they do. Very light armor. Probably quarter-inch armor.

JM: When the --- my understanding is that they moved your detachment from Schofield down here to Fort Armstrong.

GM: Right.

JM: Why was that?

GM: They probably felt there was going to be more stuff coming in, and there really was because we would get, you know, whole shiploads of vehicles come in and put 'em in some of the parks around the docks. Make sure the people who were supposed to service 'em, serviced 'em, and got them ready for units that would come down and claim 'em, take 'em back.

JM: When you --- had you had much in the way of training with arms or combat, or firing range?

GM: Oh, I had to do my initial training with the 27th Infantry.

JM: And did you keep up proficiency after that, in the quartermaster?

GM: Right, we had to do every six months, go through qualifications.

JM: Uh-huh.

GM: Six months, and it was usually six months to nine months before they got around to all of us.

JM: Everyone's got a popular idea from the movies and all this, James Jones', you know, "*FROM HERE TO ETERNITY*"?

GM: Mm-hm.

JM: How did you --- what did you think about the book and the movie? Have you seen it?

GM: Some of the social aspects were real true. You know.

JM: What kind of things?

GM: Oh, the fact that a typical dog face, if you want to use the term, typical dog face had a limited social activity, so each of them sort of went out and made their own. And I think that's what I got out of it, the film. Don't know what you did, but.

JM: What about the gulf between officers and enlisted? Did you encounter much of that?

GM: Essentially, you know, I guess I accepted that kind of thing in the military. But it did not as --- really try to socialize with them, whenever there was, say, a detachment party, or something like that. They would come, along with their wives, and there was mingling then, but no real effort to, you know, buddy-buddy at that time.

JM: When you came out of Fort Armstrong, you were a whole lot closer to the, you know, bright lights of Honolulu and all that, and Hotel Street, and all. Did that --- was that good duty to be down at Fort Armstrong and . . .

GM: Oh yeah.

JM: . . . got away from the planes?

GM: Oh yeah.

JM: What kind of things would you guys go for on Saturday nights, or whatever? What type of recreation activities were there?

GM: Fortunately, some of us down in this situation could mingle with a lot of civilians, and there were invites to homes, you know, back and forth, that kind of thing. Very good friendships established.

JM: With locals?

GM: With local people. And they understood our situation and tried to, you know, make it easy.

JM: How did you spend the night of December 6?

GM: (Coughing) Well, some local friends had taken me on Saturday to a football game. There was a football game between -- I think it was Willamette University and either the Iolani, or University of Hawaii. I forget which. And they had played the game and we sort of had dinner, and then I came back. I was tuckered out that night and went to bed, but there were a couple of guys that said, "Let's go out to Waikiki early in the morning and get in some swimming before the crowds get there."

And so we went out about seven o'clock in the morning. 'Cause you just went out, caught the bus, head on down to -- I guess it was Kalakaua?

JM: That's it.

GM: And . . .

JM: It doesn't look much the same, but.

GM: No, it doesn't. And it was a quick hop. The only requirements was when you went out of the post, you had to have a shirt on.

JM: You didn't have to be in uniform?

GM: No. No, it was peacetime. You get to a point, it was peacetime, and there was some relaxation type things there. All they insisted was if you were wearing swimming trunks, you wore a shirt and come back with a shirt. (Chuckles)

JM: So you actually were at Waikiki?

GM: Yeah, yeah.

JM: When did you start to notice that the morning was a little weird?

GM: It started getting different soon after we -- there were sirens, you know. Normally a military vehicle would not use a siren going through town.

You know, some of them had them -- and here were vehicles, you know, running down the street, with sirens going and same with people, police vehicles, and we began to see over, you know, on the far side. It was looking real smoky.

JM: Could you hear anything?

GM: Not really. Every once in a while, though, as we -- I had a portable radio. That long, that wide, that high. And the son of a buck weighed about, what, thirty pounds, maybe? This was portable. And turned it on and they were playing music, and then they butted in. They'd say, "This is an air raid alert. Take cover."

And we kept trying to get more of it because not many people were coming out and saying anything. They would play music and then come on with this. And then finally they said, "All military personnel return to your base. All Naval personnel return to your base."

JM: About --- what do you think the time lag was from when you first heard this?

GM: Probably about at fifteen minutes to half-hour, when we, I guess, got the brains to turn the thing on and start listening.

JM: So they were giving alerts saying, "Air raid, take cover," well before they announced military personnel return?

GM: I can't be sure. I'm sure there were mixes.

JM: Mm-hm. Did --- when you heard the recall -- I'll call it a recall order -- what went through your mind?

GM: I thought it must be serious or they wouldn't be telling us, you know.

JM: Did you associate that with what you were seeing in the distance, the smoke ball?

GM: Not really until we got on the bus. We had a big kanaka that was a bus driver, and he told us, you know, some things. And every once in a while, boy, you know, some of these big kanakas, they can perspire like crazy. (Chuckles) Every once in a while, he'd jump off the bus and look up in the air and start sweating, and jump back on and drive two or three blocks, and then finally got a -- I guess it was a Navy pilot or something down. He was in civvies. But he told us what was going on.

JM: He had gotten word?

GM: I don't know how but he apparently lived out in this area someplace.

JM: Can you remember what he told you? -- what your first real hard information was?

GM: He said there's something on an attack out at Pearl. He says, "I gotta get there." And he says, "I don't know any more than that." He said, "Everybody is being recalled."

JM: At this point, you still didn't know who was . . .

GM: Not really. The guy, the bus driver was really the guy, I guess, that was feeding us information. And I guess we picked up some more people on the way and just word of mouth.

JM: Did you know it was Japanese attacking, or have any suspicions?

GM: I guess by the time we got off at Fort Armstrong, we pretty well thought that was what it was.

JM: Just a guess or from past experiences, had you been given alerts that Japan might try something?

GM: Yeah, in fact, because we had had detachments. They'd pull out a group of people and we had -- and they'd rotate the assignment to assign -- people assigned to the top of Hawaiian Gas and Electric. And also there was a water company, or water district, or something. They had people up on top of there and there had been some barbed wire and placements that had been put up in some parts of the area, along the beach.

JM: Afraid of infiltrators, or . . .

GM: Yeah, I suppose. At night, they push 'em shut. I don't know that you could push 'em apart, but it was apart.

JM: Describe the scene. What was at Fort Armstrong when you got there?

GM: Well, while they were checking us when we coming in the gate, they're, you know, all those either visual ID [*identification*] or somebody knew you, or whatever. And I guess fortunately we were known and got in. Went right to the unit and they were pulling musters periodically, and assigning people to, you know -- there was a pooled coral area down there. It's hard rock and coral and I guess they felt they would take up positions there and also put some people in some of the docks. You know, they had docks along that way, dock warehouses.

JM: What did they have you do?

GM: Well, first thing was go out and try to dig a slip trench in the coral. Well, I have fun, try it sometime. You have coral around San Francisco?

JM: I lived here for three years. I know what it's like.

GM: Okay, like concrete or even better. And if you couldn't do it, you know, they had sense. We couldn't get too far. Finally we started getting some sandbags from someplace and laid those up.

JM: What were you expecting? Did you think you might have an actual invasion?

GM: Who could tell? You know, who could tell?

JM: Was there scuttlebutt running around?

GM: Oh sure. (Chuckles)

JM: Yeah. You remember any of it?

GM: No, we were actually preparing for what we thought was an invasion. Worst thing was at night, you'd get down into these positions. You know how the waves go along the shore and then back off, back and forth. And you'd hear this and it would drive you nuts, you know, just trying to figure out what was happening, if you were hearing things or not. A lot of waves got challenged.

JM: Do you have any hard information on what happened at Hickam and Wheeler, and Pearl?

GM: Gradually because we had contacts with all of these people. We had people assigned from them to us. For example, we had a warrant officer that was assigned from -- and this was a couple days later -- but these people had been assigned to us for a long period of time, for ordnance contact. And this one warrant officer came down and said, you know, the fantastic thing that he wasn't in his room. He and another warrant officer shared a room. The other guy was going to get married and shell or something went off in the room, just blew this wedding ring this guy had right into the wall. Just right into the wall.

JM: Like embedded it, right?

GM: Yeah, dug it out. Yeah. After a while, you know, things began -- how do you put a time frame on that recount?

JM: Did they have --- Fort Armstrong, you wouldn't normally think of it as a military bastion. Did they have weapons for you guys? You had an armory and all that?

GM: We had only the light arms, thirty caliber machine guns, primarily BARs [*Browning automatic rifle*]. And BARs aren't all that bad. You know what I mean by BARs? BAR isn't all that bad, but if you got a guy that knows how to handle it.

JM: Do you remember the first night, the night of December 7?

GM: Mm-hm.

JM: Any memories on it? Do you remember what they thought was an air raid over Pearl Harbor that night?

GM: There was something that came through and there was a hell of a lot of tracers going up on something. I don't know what it was.

JM: Did they . . .

GM: I had been pulled back to the office down at -- they had an office down at the corner of -- what the hell was that street? It was a little office down on the corner, and we overlooked the docks. And every once in a while, some guys get the patrols mixed up and start shooting at each other, which wasn't funny.

JM: No, here in Honolulu, you mean?

GM: Yeah.

JM: Yeah.

GM: Yeah, you know, they were supposed to guard the warehouse dock, and that was essentially a watertight, front thing. Every once in a while, somebody would overstep his bounds, somebody start firing at him and challenge him. And I don't think anybody got hit, but there was sure a lot of screaming and hollering.

JM: Yeah, what had happened at Pearl Harbor that night was a group of planes had come in from the *ENTERPRISE*, and everybody in the harbor opened up on 'em.

GM: Great. (Chuckles) Fun and games.

JM: When the --- the bus ride from Waikiki, when you come back to Fort Armstrong, aside from your driver, did you notice anything going on in the local community, outside, did people -- was there any extra activity or folks running around? I'm asking because there was battle damage that was occurring in Honolulu.

GM: There was a lot of commotion and activity. And generally, this driver would try to stay away from that. When we got back, something went off in our motor pool, and at the time, I didn't know whether or not it was an anti-aircraft shell, or whether it was a small bomb or what. It tore up some vehicles, but . . .

JM: You mean there was an explosion, there . . .

GM: Yeah, yeah.

JM: Go ahead do that and describe, what were you doing in there?

GM: We were going through another muster again. You know, every once in a while they'd need some people someplace to go take care of another area for guarding. Then they'd pull a muster of whoever was around. If you had been up to eat or get coffee, why, you were lucky, you got to switch activities.

JM: And all of a sudden, this thing drops out of the sky.

GM: Yeah. It was the wind.

JM: Was it --- this was still while the attack was going on, between eight AM and ten AM.

GM: It was somewhere around ten o'clock, I guess. It's hard to tell, you know, could have been a spent anti-aircraft shell. Could have been some guy dumping his load before he went back and went up.

JM: What was going through your head that day? What were your feelings when you knew that, you know, you're really at war all of a sudden?

GM: I don't know. It's hard to say. You know, you start pounding a little bit inside. And after a while, you'd get used to it and you just keep going. But . . .

JM: So coming back after fifty years, knowing that you were here at a pretty important point in history, what's the single most vivid memory that you have of Pearl Harbor, as they called it, which actually was Operation Hawaii, because all the targets were attacked by now, and what's your most vivid memory?

GM: Of what?

JM: The events of the day.

GM: Just this general confusion, which I guess is normal, and I guess surprise that something like that would happen.

JM: How'd you feel towards the Japanese?

GM: Essentially, I guess, p.o.'ed, but on the other hand we had, you know, Japanese friends who were people in the, civilians in the ordnance activity. We had some civilians in our activity. And you know, you had to say what happened.

JM: So you think you were able to differentiate between the Japanese that were coming in the planes, versus the local Japanese . . .

GM: Oh yeah. Not difficult to do in light of what had been going on.

JM: What did they have you do in the days following?

GM: Essentially trying to overcome some of the battle damage. Every once in a while somebody would get unlucky. The Honolulu Mortuary was right down the street, and I guess they would bring in whole bodies that if you were lucky or unlucky, you had to go down help, you know, sprinkle formaldehyde powder on the bodies. They had mattress sacks and put 'em in mattress sacks.

JM: These were military casualties?

GM: Yeah.

JM: Civilian casualties?

GM: Hopefully they had dog tags.

JM: Where were they coming in from?

GM: I don't know.

JM: And they had you guys involved with basically graves registration type duty?

GM: Right. Apparently the mortuary could handle some of this and, I guess, you know, other military installations handled things too.

JM: So when they brought these casualties to you, they were . . .

GM: Well, they didn't bring 'em to us, they brought it down to the mortuary .

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JM: Oh, the mortuary.

GM: . . . and they took the guys down there.

JM: It was one of those team details . . .

GM: Right, right. We got a better name for it.

JM: Yeah.

GM: You know what I mean.

JM: Yeah, yeah. So what happened to you in your career after Pearl Harbor? Did you stay in the military throughout the war?

GM: Oh yeah, yeah.

JM: Where did you go?

GM: In and out of Hawaii here.

JM: Always with the quartermaster and the motor pool?

GM: Primarily ordnance, primarily ordnance outfitting, fitting up task force, or be task force in taking out to, say, Johnson or Palmyra, or Christmas, or different islands. And whatever group would go in like there'd be a group go into, say, Kwajelein. And they'd come back out, the ordnance group would come back out, go through it. Well, we'd learn from them and also find out is the kind of equipment we're putting together the right thing, because you never knew when you were going to go out with a group and so you tried to put that in a good sense.

JM: You've been to the *ARIZONA* Memorial and the visitor's center and all that?

GM: Yeah, about two years ago.

JM: How does it strike you over the huge throng of people that come through there?

GM: Hopefully they're learning.

JM: Learning what?

GM: Don't take anything to chance.

JM: Do you think that they have a feeling for what went on that day, or an understanding? Do you think we're getting through to them, or . . .

GM: Hopefully yes. Hopefully yes. I think they've done a good job up there. I was amazed. I came over about, I guess, about two years ago, and I was amazed at the number of people that were interested in what was there.

JM: When people see you with a Pearl Harbor survivor hat on, what do they come up to you and say? You know, whether you're stateside or here in Hawaii. Are they interested?

GM: They haven't said anything so far. (Chuckles) One lady asked me for the time. And I had to check myself on that one. I wasn't sure what she asked for. But no, generally, they've been very nice, as I said, you know. I have a Japanese friend here and I have a pilot friend here. He and his wife were very nice. And generally, the acceptance has been good and I think gradually we'll understand the Japanese government thinking. I'm not talking about the individuals. I think the individuals think differently than the government. I think so.

JM: You mean today's government or the 1941 government?

GM: Both. It's surprising. I see parallels in the two. You know, that east Asia co-pros-- what do they call it? Co-pros-- . . .

JM: Co-prosperity.

GM: Co-prosperity sphere. That has a lot of similarities to the type of things that they're doing now. And I think that there's nothing wrong with being aggressive for your own country's economic condition, but we have to be aggressive for ours too.

JM: You'd be interested in ever meeting and talking with any of the Japanese survivors from the other side?

GM: Probably, probably. I think have mellowed just as we have.

JM: We're going to be interviewing a couple of them next week also.

GM: Very good, very good. I like that. Very good.

JM: Well, thank you for coming here today.

GM: Well, thank you for having me.

JM: All right, let's see you on Sunday.

GM: I'll be looking out for you guys.

JM: Really, really.

END OF INTERVIEW